

Information Exchange Article

How Many Perspectives Provide a Compass? Differentiating 360-Degree and Multi-Source Feedback

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Researchers have been inconsistent regarding (a) the relationship between 360° feedback and multi-source feedback and (b) the definition of 360° feedback. In the present paper, we review these topics and offer two solutions that could facilitate effective communication about these terms.

The use of a precise vocabulary is critical to effective scientific communication. Bartley, White, and Wight (1983) addressed this issue plainly when they implored psychological researchers to use consistent definitions and to “have in mind psychology as an identifiable and coherent scientific discipline” (p. 431). Bartley and his colleagues reviewed several deficits that occur in the scientific psychological vocabulary. These deficits include, among other things, concepts that are unnecessarily labeled as synonyms, concepts that have conflicting meanings among their users, and concepts that are not followed with definitions. The lack of precise and consistent definitions appears to be particularly evident in research involving 360° feedback and multi-source feedback. The meanings of these terms might seem intuitive, yet researchers are often contradictory when describing 360° feedback and its relation to multi-source feedback. In the present paper, we review the existing uncertainty about 360° and multi-source feedback and offer two potential solutions.¹

The Use and Misuse of the Term “360° Feedback”

Unfortunately, researchers have been inconsistent when referring to the term “360° feedback.” The first inconsistency occurs when some researchers equate 360° feed-

back with multi-source feedback and other researchers do not. Many researchers indicate that the two terms are interchangeable. In contrast, some authors indicate explicitly that 360° feedback is a particular kind of multi-source feedback. The ambiguous distinction between 360° and multi-source feedback appears related to a second inconsistency: defining 360° feedback. Some researchers associate 360° feedback with self-ratings, superior-ratings, peer-ratings, and subordinate-ratings (e.g., Tornow, 1993a). However, researchers have also described feedback designs as 360° feedback while omitting one or more of these rater groups. Researchers sometimes include additional rater groups, like customers and suppliers, into the concept of 360° feedback.

This definitional disorder exists despite four journals with special issues devoted specifically to 360° feedback (Atwater & Waldman, 1998; Church & Bracken, 1997b; Payne, 1998; Tornow, 1993b). Even within these special issues authors provide conflicting descriptions of 360° feedback. In three sequential articles within one special issue, 360° feedback was linked to “co-worker feedback” (Kaplan, 1993, p. 299), to “peers, clients, customers, and managers along with subordinates” (Bernardin, Dahmus, & Redmon, 1993, p. 323), and to “superiors, peers, subordinates, and themselves” (Hazucha, Hezlett, & Schneider, 1993, p. 325). We suspect that many authors recognize the ambiguity associated with 360° feedback, but feel required to avoid precise definitions because 360° feedback has been described unsystematically. For example, Church and Bracken (1997a) acknowledge that 360° feedback differs from multi-source feedback, but do not provide a tangible explanation as to how they differ. In short, it seems that many researchers have forgotten the “360” in 360° feedback.

This research was supported by an Air Force Research Laboratory grant awarded to the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the United States Air Force Academy. We thank Mike Benson, Jennifer Clarke, Jeff Green, and Jeff Jackson for their assistance in the development of this article.

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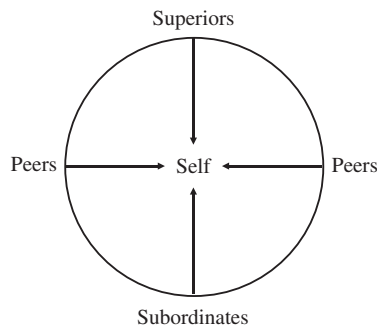


Figure 1. The 360° feedback model.

Clarifying the 360° Feedback Model

Not surprisingly, the path to understanding the 360° feedback model begins with the concept of 360°. The notion of “360°” implies that there are multiple raters and that these raters can be conceptualized in the form of a circle. This provides a starting point for demonstrating the carelessness of equating 360° feedback and multi-source feedback. A self-rating and a peer-rating constitute multi-source feedback, but it is difficult to conceive of such feedback as coming from 360°. It follows then that researchers should not equate 360° feedback and multi-source feedback (although many do). Instead, whereas multi-source feedback requires only two raters, 360° feedback requires a full circle of feedback. This “circle” can be created using members of an organizational hierarchy. Figure 1 shows how superior-ratings, peer-ratings, and subordinate-ratings can be conceptualized in the form of a circle around an individual who provides self-ratings.

This model of 360° feedback exists theoretically as a particular kind of multi-source feedback because it is based on two important organizational principles: proximity and power. Superiors, peers, and subordinates provide the main proximal working relationships for any organization member. These relationships also represent the typical formal power relationships that exist within an organization. While organizations can differ dramatically in their goals, most organizations do contain some form of organizational structure that is based on power (see Pfeffer, 1981). Organization charts characteristically place superiors above, subordinates below, and peers laterally to an individual. Of course, even within these rater groups, individuals often hold varying degrees of power over the individual being rated. For example, particular peers might possess greater levels of expert power (French & Raven, 1959). Although such within-group power variations might influence the feedback process, 360° and multi-source feedback designs are based on the formal power relationships identified through organizational structure.

As indicated previously, some researchers have supported this model of 360° feedback. Tornow (1993a), for example, provided a similar pictorial representation of 360° feedback.² Bracken, Timmreck, and Church (2001a)

indicated a preference for the term multi-source feedback because some terms “imply inclusion of all possible feedback sources in a circle” (p. xxv). Despite these contributions, researchers continue to use “360° feedback” incompatibly. The tendency to extend the notion of 360° feedback to include deviating feedback designs is understandable. To illustrate, a feedback design that includes self-ratings, superior-ratings, and peer-ratings, but no subordinate-ratings, would still be relatively thorough and might therefore “feel” like it merits the title of 360° feedback. Likewise, the inclusion of additional groups, like customers, into the so-called 360° feedback seems innocuous enough. Unfortunately, these definitional practices have created continued confusion because they diminish any clear distinction between 360° and multi-source feedback.

Addressing Under-Inclusion

Referring to feedback as “360° feedback” when only some of the four rater groups are represented is troublesome because it undermines the principles of proximity and power that make 360° feedback distinctive. When a purported 360° feedback design omits self-ratings, superior-ratings, peer-ratings, or subordinate-ratings, the definitional parameters of 360° feedback become indistinct. Specifically, this practice renders it unclear as to how many groups, and which groups, are necessary to constitute feedback coming from 360°. The omission of superiors, peers, or subordinates quickly removes part of the circle that is necessary to conceptualize the notion of feedback coming from 360°. Perhaps the best argument for excluding a rater group, while still using the term 360° feedback, would involve the potential omission of self-ratings. However, self-ratings are necessary to evaluate self-other discrepancies and therefore provide the hub of the 360° circle.

Addressing Over-Inclusion

The concept of 360° feedback is undermined similarly when researchers extend the term to include additional rater groups such as customers, suppliers, family members, and distally related organization members (e.g., members of different organizational divisions). We do not dispute the potential benefits of using these rater groups. Rather, we return to the notion that 360° feedback comes from an organizational hierarchy in which an individual is encircled by superiors, peers, and subordinates (see Figure 1). Additional raters do not fit sensibly into 360° feedback because such rater groups cannot be placed meaningfully in the organizational hierarchy. Consider the case of customers. Customers probably do not hold less power than organization members, but it is awkward to consider customers to be peers or superiors. Instead, customers are best represented on a separate dimension as individuals

who indicate an overall satisfaction with a product or service. Likewise, suppliers, family members, and distant organization members might provide useful feedback, but do not represent proximal working relationships based on power. Indeed, some research indicates that external rating sources, like customers and suppliers, tend to focus more on performance outcomes rather than on performance behavior (Farr & Newman, 2001).

Conclusion

Despite the plethora of published research about organizational feedback, no writing to date has been devoted specifically to clarifying the relationship between 360° feedback and multi-source feedback. We hope that the present paper will elucidate future communication by providing researchers a common reference for defining 360° feedback and correctly identifying its relationship to multi-source feedback. To review, these concepts are not synonymous. Multi-source feedback is a process through which an individual receives personalized feedback from two or more raters (e.g., a self-rating and a peer-rating; two peer-ratings). Three hundred and sixty-degree feedback is a type of multi-source feedback which dictates that feedback comes from self-ratings and at least one rating from each of the following rater groups: superiors, peers, and subordinates.

It follows then that researchers have two possible solutions if they wish to halt the 360° and multi-source feedback confusion. Researchers could accept this definition of 360° feedback and use the term “360° feedback” more carefully. A more straightforward solution involves simply omitting use of the term 360° feedback altogether; multi-source feedback is usually a superior term because it does not convey the awkward implication of a conceptual feedback circle. Besides, research has provided several useful terms which succinctly describe different kinds of feedback (e.g., upward, downward, superior, peer, subordinate, coworker, etc.).

Our concerns about using precise and consistent definitions should not be misconstrued as support for, or criticism against, 360° feedback or multi-source feedback. The use of multiple raters makes intuitive sense and receives support from an array of research (for an initial review see Bracken, Timmreck, & Church, 2001b). At the same time, converging evidence indicates that adding raters with differing perspectives (e.g., 360° feedback) contributes little to job performance ratings above and beyond the benefits associated with simply adding any raters (Scullen, Mount, & Goff, 2000; Viswesvaran, Schmidt, & Ones, 2002). Thus, the practical value of additional rater groups remains open for debate. At the very least, inconsistent definitional practices are unnecessarily distracting to researchers who communicate about these issues. However, the ambiguous use of “360° feedback” might

have an important unnoticed influence. We speculate that 360° feedback has become a buzzword that has been used to imply something akin to “thorough multi-source feedback.” This recurring association might tacitly convey to researchers and practitioners that multi-source feedback should come from a variety of rater groups despite existing evidence that belies this notion.

It is also important to note that the 360° and multi-source distinction extends beyond personalized feedback. Multiple raters can be included in an appraisal or selection process that does not focus on developmental feedback. Multiple raters can also be used for research purposes. In these cases, organizations use ratings primarily for objectives other than individual feedback and multi-source feedback might be better conceptualized as multi-source evaluations or appraisals. Hence, the arguments provided in the present paper ultimately distinguish between 360° designs and multi-source designs generally.

In closing, we would like to note that the confusion between 360° feedback and multi-source feedback appears related to a common error in deductive logic. Researchers might agree with the following premise: If it is 360° feedback, then it is multi-source feedback. However, many researchers also indicate that multi-source feedback is 360° feedback. If one accepts our argument that 360° feedback is a particular form of multi-source feedback, then equating multi-source feedback and 360° feedback is fallacious. Logicians term this error “affirming the consequent” (Copi & Cohen, 2001). This fallacy can be described symbolically as follows:

If P then Q;
Q;
Therefore P.

We will use a familiar example to demonstrate the fallacy of affirming the consequent. Music enthusiasts would overwhelmingly agree that “jazz” is “music.” Those same enthusiasts would be puzzled by anyone suggesting that “music” is therefore “jazz.” We hope that our clarification of 360° feedback will assist in creating a familiar framework for researchers. Like music, multi-source feedback can take many forms, and like jazz is to music, 360° feedback is just one form of multi-source feedback.

Notes

1. Researchers have used additional terms like multi-rater feedback (e.g., Church & Bracken, 1997a). In our review of the literature, both multi-source feedback and multi-rater feedback refer to feedback coming from two or more individuals. However, multi-source feedback appears to be the predominant term. For the sake of clarity, we also used the term multi-source feedback.
2. The model presented in Figure 1 is similar to the model presented by Tornow (1993a). We changed the term

“supervisor” to “superiors” because superiors can use different titles (e.g., manager, supervisor) and organization members can have multiple superiors. This depiction of 360° feedback might not appear to be particularly “360” when only one peer provides ratings. We believe that this design remains appropriately called 360° feedback because peer-ratings can be placed laterally in either direction.

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